DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 262 138 UD 024 476

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TITLE Equality, Equity and Excellence in Israel's Junior High Schools: Likelihood or Illusion.
PUB DATE 84
NOTE 13p.; Paper presented at the International Conference on Education in the 90's (1st, Tel-Aviv, Israel, 1984).
PUB TYPE Reports - General (140) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Academic Achievement; Busing; Educationally Disadvantaged; *Educational Objectives; *Educational Quality; *Equal Education; Heterogeneous Grouping; Junior High Schools; *Junior High School Students; Low Income Groups; Outcomes of Education; Peer Relationship; School Organization; *Social Integration; Track System (Education)
IDENTIFIERS *Israel

ABSTRACT

This paper evaluates whether both equality or equity and excellence can be achieved in the present Israeli junior high schools. While academic goals are high and are, at least to some extent, achieved, the goal of providing an equitable education for students of lower socio-economic backgrounds and different ethnic backgrounds is not achieved. In many ways the emphasis on academic excellence creates problems for disadvantaged students in that teachers feel that the greater the academic input, the greater the progress for advantaged and disadvantaged students alike. However, there are no special programs for disadvantaged students and therefore the students have no opportunity to improve. Furthermore, the transfer to junior high school involves, in most cases, busing which has a negative impact on the disadvantaged students' ability to participate in extracurricular activities, and a homeroom in which disadvantaged students are in a minority and must reject their disadvantaged peers in order to gain acceptance by the advantaged students. The author finds that the tracking system poses further problems--students are all required to take the same subjects, offered at three levels of achievement. This means that frequently disadvantaged students are studying material which will be of absolutely no use to them when they progress to a vocational high school. The disadvantaged students enter the junior high school with high expectations which are usually not met and thus contribute to a problem of negative attitude. It is recommended that administrators and policy makers consider new methods for effectively handling learning and social relations in the classroom. (CG)

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Equality, Equity and Excellence in Israel's Junior High Schools: Likelihood or Illusion

Yehuda Amir

(Presented at the 1st International Conference on Education in the 90's, Tel-Aviv, 1984.)

Many speakers tend to open their presentation by stating that their talk will be quite different from the topic written in the program--either because they were never asked about it, or they were asked about it a long time ago, or simply because they have another lecture ready and did not want to bother about preparing a new one. Well, first of all let me state that I'll make an exception to this rule. In other words, I plan to address the topic exactly as it is written in the program.

I shall try to evaluate whether both equality or equity and excellence can be achieved in the present Israeli junior high schools. I'll first try to point out the main objectives of this school system, the way they are translated and implemented into the daily life and routine of the school and, consequently, try to evaluate whether the outcome can be regarded as a success or an illusion in terms of the achievement of both equity and

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excellence. If the conclusion is negative, one can also address the question whether this is simply impossible to achieve, or it can be done but under different conditions.

The three stated principal aims that the Junior High School was planned to achieve and more positively than the achievements of the previous system of eight years of elementary school and four years of high school are: (a) Raising the academic level of all children; (b) Narrowing the gap between children from the different social and ethnic strata of Israel's society; and (c) Improving the social relations and mutual acceptance of children from these different backgrounds.

The first aim, namely, raising the academic level, was planned to be achieved by (a) separating the the upper classes (i.e., 7th and 8th grades) from the elementary school, thereby creating a new and independent educational entity together with the 9th grade, and (b) through the academization of the training of the junior high school teachers. (For those in the audience who are not familiar with the system--teachers of the elementary schools are trained in non-university teachers' seminaries.) It was assumed that the academization will provide a scholastically better equipped teacher for the 7th- and 8th-grade classes and thereby help to raise the educational achievements of the children in these grades.

Without going into detail about this, I would like to state that it stands to reason that this aim has indeed, at least to some extent, been achieved. Thus, excellence has been advanced. But is the same true for equality or equity?

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To answer this question, let us deal with the second aim, which was to reduce the existing educational gap between children from different social groups in Israel, such as advantaged and disadvantaged, or of Western and Middle-Eastern background. Achieving this aim could definitely serve the equality principle, but can it be done?

Let me illustrate the problem on the blackboard.

(Present two graphs for the two aims and emphasize the difficulties and the possible solutions for a 40-pupil heterogeneous class: Either overemphasize the needs of the achievers or those of the underachievers.)

To understand what actually happens, let us examine this problem from the point of view and orientation of the school and the teacher.

Research on Israel's junior high schools has pointed out the massive emphasis the school staff accords to academic achievement and the relative neglect of pupils' personal and social development. One has to remember that most teachers in these schools are university graduates. They see their primary goal as providing pupils with academic skills and information in their area of specialization. After all, that is what they have been trained for, many of them are probably good at this, and they feel that society and the school authorities expect exactly this from them. They also know that school principals prefer university graduates because they possess greater subject matter knowledge. Stress on achievement is also apparent in the attitudes of

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teachers and administrators in support for ability tracking in arithmetic, Hebrew, and English. In addition, the reluctance to relinquish a few hours per week from subject matter to devote to social activities is frequently based on the possible detrimental effect on the achievement of the pupils.

Another issue particularly relevant to the schooling of disadvantaged pupils pertains to the relationship between the junior and senior high school. Optimally, the junior high school should be physically and administratively linked to a comprehensive senior high school, thereby providing the atmosphere and opportunity for all pupils to continue their secondary schooling in a program appropriate to their interests and abilities. However, many of the junior high schools are linked to selective academic senior high schools which emphasize college preparatory subjects. This arrangement produces at least three negative effects on disadvantaged pupils. First, it effectively bars many of them from continuing their secondary education in the same school. Second, the academic demands of the senior high school to a great extent dictated the curriculum in the junior high school so that it was largely inappropriate for many disadvantaged pupils. Third, the sense of academic futility among these pupils is heightened in the junior high school.

May I remind you of the third goal of junior high school, namely, integration between children from different social and ethnic backgrounds. However, the stress on academic achievement and the de-emphasis of the pupils' personal development create

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schooling conditions which severely limit the probability of successful school integration. Teachers and principals are expected, with only minimal guidance from the Ministry, to organize their classes, methods, and materials in ways that would maximize the realization of both the integration and scholastic goals. Research clearly indicates that, in general, they have no preparation for this and really have neither innovative ideas nor the suitable tools and techniques how to accomplish these goals. Unfortunately, hardly anything substantial has been prepared and no priorities have been given by the central educational authorities to provide the teachers with programs, techniques and new innovative approaches to deal effectively with the social and academic aspects of heterogeneous classrooms and integrated schools.

It is interesting to note that most teachers believe in simultaneously achieving both reform goals by increasing efforts to enhance academic achievement. They express the opinion that the lack of positive interpersonal relations between advantaged and disadvantaged students is not due to cultural or economic differences, but to the ability-achievement differential between the two groups of pupils. Given this state of affairs, they reason, emphasis should be placed on increased academic inputs, including the disadvantaged children, in order to shrink the achievement gap. If this effort proves successful, disadvantaged children will figure more prominently in the academic and social life of the class and they will be more readily accepted socially and be treated respectfully by their advantaged classmates.

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Undeniably, the logic of this argument has some merit. However, two fallacies came to light after observing the classroom process in the schools. First, academic inputs are neither increased nor more varied for disadvantaged pupils. Furthermore, the same methods used in the advantaged homogeneous classroom are applied to the multiethnic, multi-level junior high school class. In the whole class, the lecture-recitation method is the norm of instruction, whereas more promising strategies such as small-group cooperative learning are in use on a broad scale in a few schools. This state of affairs is similar to that reported by Beckum and Dasho (1980) in their study of newly integrated schools in the U.S.

Thus, in sum, the emphasis on academic achievement leads to a situation where the social objective of the reform is contingent upon realization of the academic objective. Since the meeting of pupils from different backgrounds is an insufficient basis for improved pupil performance and the quality of schooling in the integrated junior high school has not advanced significantly for disadvantaged pupils, there is little reason to believe that the prevailing strategy of achieving both reform goals by emphasizing the academic achievement objective has any real likelihood of success.

Let us now turn to aspects related to the student, and I'll mention three that seem most important to me.

1. Adjustment and social status. Transfer from elementary to junior high school requires all pupils to adjust to new physical

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surroundings, norms, teachers, and classmates. Disadvantaged pupils found this process more difficult due to objective and subjective circumstances. A powerful example of the adjustment difficulties facing disadvantaged pupils is reflected in the issue of busing. Research findings indicate that practically in all cases, the disadvantaged children were brought to the advantaged pupils' neighborhood. This phenomenon had several significant implications. First, technical problems such as buses not arriving on time in the morning or leaving before all school activities were over affected only the disadvantaged pupils. For this reason, they were frequently unable to fully participate in extracurricular activities. Second, they were physically more taxed than their advantaged classmates. Third, as a result of arriving and leaving the school en masse, advantaged pupils tended to perceive them as an undifferentiated body of children different from themselves. Finally, the fact that the advantaged pupils "host" the disadvantaged pupils added to the atmosphere of different classes of citizenship among the student body.

Within the homeroom, adjustment difficulties for disadvantaged children were equally pronounced. The homeroom was usually composed of a majority of advantaged pupils constituting a relatively cohesive, normative social group in contrast to the numerically inferior, incohesive group of disadvantaged pupils. Virtually all disadvantaged children desired to be part of the former social group; however, only a few were accepted by the advantaged pupils. Upper-track disadvantaged children faced a

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painful dilemma. Though advantaged pupils were willing to accept them, the price they had to pay for such acceptance was rejection of lower-track disadvantaged classmates and neighbors.

2. Actualizing pupil potential. Ministry of Education and Culture policy compromises between absolute heterogeneity and total homogeneity in the classroom. Most subjects are taught in the heterogeneous homeroom and, in many schools, language skills, English (second language), and mathematics are taught to homogeneous groups of children at three levels of achievement. The rationale for this agreement is to allow each pupil to advance at a pace suitable to his ability and still allow for considerable contact among pupils from different levels of achievement. Though the criterion for homogeneity is primarily past achievement, the overlap between ethnic group membership and achievement level is quite high, so that most Western children are high achievers and most Middle-Eastern pupils are low achievers.

Does this tracking system contribute to pupils' educational, social and emotional welfare? Evidence on this matter is as yet not definite. It does not seem to affect the social or emotional lives of upper-track advantaged children, since their status remains high in both heterogeneous and homogeneous conditions.

On the other hand, low-track pupils--mostly disadvantaged Middle-Easterners--may lose in all areas due to tracking. One reason for this loss is the tacit assumption held by many teachers of academic high schools that all children should be prepared to continue in this kind of school. Accordingly, identical topics

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are taught in all three tracks, even though some of these topics are clearly irrelevant to low-track children, who will actually continue in a vocational school or as apprentices. For example, teenagers who cannot construct a simple letter requesting a service from some agency spend hours upon hours during the school year ostensibly analyzing linguistic anomalies in complex passages in literature.

Since many of the topics to be learned are perceived as irrelevant, and since, as noted earlier, teaching methods are not geared uniquely to low-achieving pupils, nor are non-academic abilities fostered, lower-track children are generally not motivated to learn in any meaningful way and their achievement remains low. The fact that they are separated from their higher-achieving classmates for the tracked subjects only makes their existing low academic and social status more pronounced, leading, in many cases, to deeper social isolation and lowered feelings of self-worth.

3. Disadvantaged pupils' attitudes toward the integrated school. Most disadvantaged as well as the advantaged pupils enter the integrated junior high school with positive attitudes and expectations. The disadvantaged anticipate educational and social advancement unavailable to them in the neighborhood elementary school. These expectations, however, in many cases, are not fulfilled as most disadvantaged pupils are placed in the lower tracks and many of them are socially unacceptable to their advantaged classmates. This combination of social and academic

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isolation often results in a heightened sense of futility and negative attitudes to the school.

On the other hand, the positive expectations of the relatively few upper-track disadvantaged children are met. Since achievement seems to be a major criterion for social acceptance, upper-track disadvantaged children benefit not only from more sophisticated facilities and university-trained teachers, but from new friendships with advantaged children and the knowledge that they are capable of succeeding in the broader, multiethnic society. This process tends to foster feelings of competence and a more positive self-image for high-achieving disadvantaged pupils.

It is noteworthy that in those schools where the pupils' social and emotional development is also emphasized, a warmer, more personal atmosphere is evident and the pupils, low- as well as high-track, relate more positively to the school experience. Furthermore, there seems to be greater willingness on the part of advantaged pupils to actively work towards achieving the goals of integration by means of shared activities with disadvantaged pupils during and after the formal school day.

The picture I have painted here may appear gloomier than it really is and I would like, therefore, to point out a number of positive factors that may portray the situation in a more balanced fashion. And although I'll do this very briefly, these are important factors to be taken into account:

1. Israel's society, in general, is still committed to social integration and equal opportunities for all in the

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educational settings. Thus, some price, but not a too high one, has to be paid for the equality or equity of the disadvantaged; the readiness for this seems to be here.

2. The school authorities and the Ministry of Education and Culture are, at least for the time being, committed to integration and equal opportunities for all. Thus, the backing of important "relevant others" for the equality and equity principle does exist (but one should remember that the backing for excellence exists, too).
3. Children definitely contribute status to excellence. But status can be gained through social acceptance as well. In addition, fortunately enough ethnic origin plays a relatively small role in the status attribution of most children.
4. And finally--there are still schools, though definitely not the majority of them, which succeed in combining effectively the equity (or equality) orientation with that of excellence. Still, in many and probably most junior high schools, striving for scholastic excellence is the main orientation, unfortunately at the expense of equity and equality. As scholastic achievement is highly correlated with ethnic and social backgrounds it is clear who may have to pay the price.

From all that has been said, it seems that achieving both excellence and equality or equity in Israel's junior high schools is difficult to achieve.

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Where does all this leave us? Do we have to give up on achieving both the excellence and the equality goals? As already stated, if nothing is being done, nothing will be changed and equality and equity will have to give in to the striving for achievement and excellence. (Incidentally, the question of whether we actually do achieve excellence is not relevant here.) Still, is it worth trying? Is there a chance of achieving those seemingly incompatible goals?

Time will not allow me to elaborate on this point, but recent innovations in education have suggested ways, techniques and approaches that can benefit both advantaged and disadvantaged students in heterogeneous classrooms, in both academic and social spheres.

It is clear that only if a major effort is made by educational authorities, by universities, and by researchers to intensively develop new ways of effectively handling learning and social relations in the classroom, the teachers will be able to fulfill the promise of both equality for all and excellence. Junior high schools and ethnic integration were supposed to be the vehicle for achieving these aims, but organizational changes are generally only necessary avenues to cure, not the solution itself.

Let us hope that policymakers in education will have the wisdom and strength to give priority to the development of ways and techniques which will enable the schools to achieve the almost impossible: Equity and equality, as well as excellence.

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